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Abstract

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Familiar Wounded Birds

by Tracy S. Youngblom

Jesus Christ. I'm at my kitchen table perusing the paper Saturday morning when there is a tremendous crash. I startle and jerk and tear two small handfuls of newspaper, one off each edge of the Business section.

Another bird. My wife lures them here with feeders on iron hooks stuck in the lawn right outside the big bay window. All manner come and eat and make merry—cardinals, juncos, chickadees, nuthatches—Jesus, my command of bird names has increased—and every once in a while one flies into the glass and falls to the deck.

I read that birds do that for strange reasons. They're not blinded by glare, contrary to popular opinion. They see so well that when they spot reflections of trees in the glass or open sky they think it's a new universe to explore. Off they soar to a bitter end.

Experts have their theories, and I have mine. I think the birds see



their own reflections and mistake themselves for another bird because they also peck away at the fake glass on the feeder itself, even though it's clouded with seed hulls and slime from various bird breaths. They'll attack to protect their supply of food or a prospective mate. How do they know it's not their prospective mate? They really are blind. Blind to their own ambition. Blind to the power of their desires. Christ, do birds have desires?

I tape the torn pieces back onto the Business section, pick up Variety and snap it open, and then, Jesus, there's her picture, my old girlfriend. Well, she liked to be called that. I didn't mind, though I sometimes saw other women. She's got a book of poetry just published, her first. I'm happy for her. You can't begrudge someone what they consider their good fortune.

She showed me some of her poems when we were dating, and I commented appreciatively. But once when she showed me a poem about pure lust (another guy, not me), I did ask her why she hid her passion. It was a fair question. She was so wholesome. Jesus. Not someone who would want to nibble a man's neck, bite off his shirt just to taste his skin. How could she write that? She never did that to me.

Her picture looks good: playful eyebrows, stunning cheekbones, those brown amused eyes, the color of river water. I would know those eyes anywhere, even though the photo is black and white. She was a little older than me, divorced with a couple kids, but that hadn't damaged her in any way. And the thing was, I don't think she had any idea how good she looked. Once I told her, while she was undressing, that she had a great ass. She actually blushed.

We broke up, obviously. I had explained after the first few months I didn't see a future for us. I'd be obligated to sign on for a family. And though I never told her, I was wary of dating someone who didn't enjoy a drink now and then. She wanted to keep dating me anyway, so I carried on in a noncommittal way.

It's 7:00. Early May. The morning is perfect, except for the familiar wounded bird, the cloud of bird-oil it left on the outside of my window. I can smell the flowers: forsythia and lily of the valley and lilacs my wife tends. My knowledge of flowers has expanded as



well; I'm a regular nature guru now. I remind my wife of this when she complains about my lack of involvement. "Vocabulary is the first sign of involvement," I tell her, "the most important sign."

My wife won't be up for hours, but I wake at 5:00, 6:00 if I'm lucky. These early mornings are my time. When the sun rises and the world lights up, I can feel myself soften. It's a funny thing, that feeling: heading out to get the paper, before the wind wrings tears out of you, your eyes are dry as leather. It stings when one sensation bleeds into the other.

Once, when my old girlfriend and I were out for an early morning walk, I told her I used to run track in high school. She asked me to run a little ahead of her so she could watch my stride. Why I remember that, I have no idea.

I breathe in the fresh air, not polluted yet with exhaust and racket from lawn mowers, smooth the paper on the table. I take out my iPhone and my glasses, enter a few dates of her upcoming readings. Maybe there are some poems in her book about me.

I fold and crease the paper, get up to stretch my legs, glance out the window at the frenzy of sparrows gleaning broken seeds from the lawn. How many could I hit with a single squeeze of the trigger, one good spray of birdshot?

The thing is, I don't think I've properly settled the past with my old girlfriend. Sure, I enter dates in my phone, but I'm just curious. That photo could be old. Maybe she's gotten fat and gray. I may want to see for myself. We did date for a year, even if it was casual.

It's like I've had her on my mind for some time, a hum under the surface, the Musak I can't ignore. When I've found myself pissed at Jeter's rare error or Mickelson's chip shot, I've really been irritated with myself. Here I am, married, comfortable and settled, enjoying what she wanted. I am, now, the man she thought I was then—successful, even—and I could maybe make a difference, seeing as I did break her heart. I could check in, make sure she's all right, not gloat, just show some concern. Jesus, she sobbed when I left for good.

Right away, I find a link to her personal website. I don't have a

personal website. I have my business website for real estate (specialty: duplexes and fixer uppers) and that connects to my LinkedIn profile, so you can find me either way.

Christ, she hasn't wasted much time promoting herself; all of her scheduled readings from the paper, plus others, listed there in bold type. There's also a link to her Facebook page.

She's gotten married to a man whose name she withholds, thinking of me, I suppose; it says "Married," not "Married to Brad Perfect." She's "wildly in love" with him. I don't need to say that I wish her the best, then, since she's already got some version of best, her version, not surprising. Her husband appears often in her photos. Next to many of them, she repeats she's "wildly in love" with this ordinary guy: here he is on a boat, holding a fishing rod. Big deal. Here he is at some party, smiling at the camera as if he's just invented beer. Handsome but pathetic. And here they are in wedding photos, not professional ones, just ones some guest—one of her kids, probably—took of them. They stand facing each other, grinning. How cute. In one photo, her palm rests gently on his cheek.

When I left, she did that to me, her hand trailing down my neck as I backed away, saying more loudly than I meant to, "Don't cry."

She got married the same year I did, four years ago. Married happily, for love. Everyone's dream. She's not gray-haired or fat, her husband's lean, clean cut. They are the perfect fucking representation of marital bliss. They're "wildly in love." I can't believe she'd settle on a guy who has nothing to brag about except a fishing boat. Is it even his?

I close Facebook, erase the dates in my phone, gulp the last of my coffee, stalk away from her image. Stop and lean my head heavily on the glass, glance down at my striped shirt which does not quite hide my gut. I have an Open House later; I'll shower and change into something roomier. Through my reflection I see the bird, sunken and without its former sheen. Its feathers settle onto its form: bones, skin, what gives it shape? I really want to know.

I'm too late. She is living her dream and posting it openly, her way of making a lasting accusation. She's made up her mind about me;

that much is clear. There's nothing I could say now. In one of the wedding photos, she even had a glass of champagne. She wouldn't drink with me, but with this guy, it's a new game. I can't believe I felt bad for her when she discovered I'd slept with someone else.

I used to watch her brush her hair, and I loved to hold her hand, and help her cook, and I told her once, "You're amazing, so tender."

She clearly didn't appreciate me. I had washed the dishes at the end of that weekend, knowing she'd be home Sunday night. I had changed the sheets. Everything looked orderly; since she had let me stay at her house while she was out of town visiting family, I wanted to leave it nicer than when she left (she wasn't always the neatest person). It was late November, unseasonably cold; that's why I never thought to take out the bedroom garbage. I had split by the time she got home, but she obviously found the used condoms later, sticky and funky smelling, lining the bottom. Smelled them, probably.

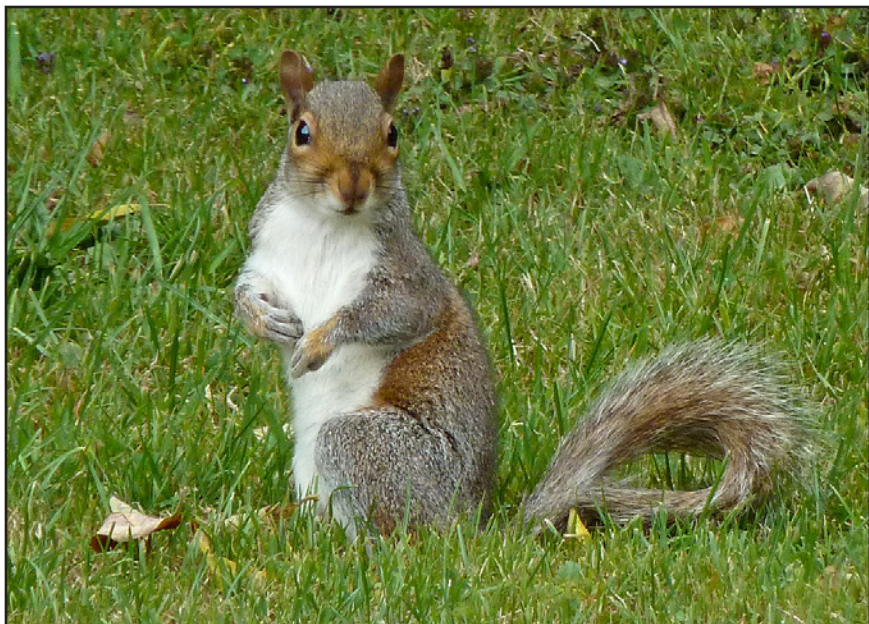
My wife stirs upstairs. 8:30. I hear her heavy footsteps on the way to the bathroom, the morning routine, the flush.

I wanted her to be angry. Anger would have been a warning, at least. When she called to say we needed to talk, I went over unsuspecting (and stupid, probably) and walked right into the great morass of her sadness, where I was almost trapped. Of course I wouldn't answer any questions about it. We weren't serious. There was nothing to answer for.

I stood there like an idiot, at her mercy, waiting for the waterworks to shut off, the whispered, persistent questions to cease. How could she throw this misery in my face? I could have defended myself against anger. I could even have stalked out, thrown a harsh "good riddance" over my shoulder, if she'd been angry.

Finally I left, backing away from her hand on my cheek—what else could I do?—the air so thick with woe I couldn't even turn around and leave like a man. I had a lingering view, tears leaking through her fingers pressed over her eyes. She had the slimmest fingers—delicate, but strong too.

The swarm of birds at the feeder disperses in a flurry—a squirrel,



shimmying up the pole. Christ, they think they own the world. Rushing outside, I wave my arms and threaten the bastard, perched now on the crest of the pole. He stares at me, defiant, like they always do. I can see his tiny fingers—paws?—gripping the metal, the tail whipping back and forth like a goddamn victory flag. Son of a bitch.

I don't realize the small landscaping stone has left my hand until I lurch forward with my right foot on the follow-through. He flinches—either I've hit him or he's a master actor—lets out a squawk, scurries down the pole and into the flowering crab, where he assumes a watchful position. He thinks he's so clever. He thinks it will be easy to wait for me to leave, then return to wasting the bird seed meant for the chickadees.

I have a solid life, no one has to tell me that. I have real maple syrup, a retirement account, a wife.

Until I have to leave for my Open House, I'm going to sit on my own goddamn front step, cradling this small handful of sharp stones, waiting for the menace to return, so I can drive it away again.

